

Mr. LEAHY. I ask unanimous consent to be able to continue as in morning business for about 3 minutes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

WELCOMING THE DALAI LAMA

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I feel honored to be a Member of the Senate and to be President pro tempore. But I cannot think of any greater honor than this morning, when I was able to introduce to the Senate an old and dear friend, His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Marcelle and I have been friends of His Holiness for decades. We count that as a great treasure, as does Senator FEINSTEIN, whom I saw earlier on the floor, another long-time friend of His Holiness, along with her husband.

I have watched him for so many years in his representation of the Tibetan people. He is joined on the floor by another Buddhist, Senator HIRONO of Hawaii. The gracious comments of Senator REID reflect how people feel about him. I think of the faith of his people and how they are moved. I told his Holiness of this story when I walked through the streets of Lhasa, Tibet, years ago, and a man holding a small child saw me and pointed to my camera and held up a picture of His Holiness.

He was risking being imprisoned for having that. But he insisted I take his picture. I did. I have given that photograph to His Holiness. I told him the story, that when we asked the man why he risked prison to show the picture of His Holiness, he said: Because people have to know. The world has to know the great faith of the Tibetan people longing for the autonomy they deserve to practice their faith.

Fortunately, they have as a symbol of that faith the Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace Prize recipient, a man who touches everybody's conscience. He touches this Catholic every time I see him. It goes beyond whatever faith you are. He is a gift to the world. I am so honored to have been able to introduce him here today.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader.

RECESS SUBJECT TO THE CALL OF THE CHAIR

Mr. REID. Mr. President, with His Holiness here in the Senate Chamber, there are a number of Senators who would like to say hello to him. So based on that, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate recess subject to the call of the Chair.

There being no objection, the Senate, at 9:44 a.m., recessed until 9:46 a.m. and reassembled when called to order by the Presiding Officer.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader.

Mr. REID. Would the Chair announce the business of the day.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will be in a period of morning business until 10:30 a.m., with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each, with the time equally divided and controlled between the two leaders or their designees, with the Republicans controlling the first half.

UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREE- MENT—EXECUTIVE NOMINA- TIONS

Mr. REID. I ask unanimous consent that following action on S. 1917, the Senate proceed to executive session to consider the following nominations: Nos. 504, 513, 640, and 547; that the Senate proceed to vote on confirmation of the nominations in the order listed; that there be 2 minutes for debate prior to each vote, equally divided in the usual form, and that the votes be 10 minutes in length; the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table, with no intervening action or debate; that no further motions be in order to any of the nominations; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action, and the Senate resume legislative session.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. REID. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. VITTER. I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

FLOOD INSURANCE AND VETERANS MEDICAL CLINICS

Mr. VITTER. I rise to talk about two very important issues for the country and for Louisiana. The first is fixing the national flood insurance system, getting it right. The good news is I think we are well on a path to doing that effectively. The second is veterans medical clinics, two of which are in Louisiana. They have been held up for completely bureaucratic reasons and aren't moving forward as they need to serve the veterans in Lafayette and Lake Charles, LA, and in about 25 other locations around the country.

First, flood insurance. Only a couple of days ago the House passed by a huge margin, over 300 votes, a strong bill to permanently fix the National Flood Insurance Program. Those aspects of the so-called Biggert-Waters act passed over 1 year ago but are unworkable, clearly creating problems on the ground.

This is great news, because unless we fix those very real problems, we would have major problems on our hands in the National Flood Insurance Program,

not only in Louisiana, not only in Florida, and not only in the Superstorm Sandy area, but in every State in the country—every State. It is not a question of if these issues are coming to your State, it is a question of when and exactly to what extent.

Over 1 year ago, we passed the Biggert-Waters act. That was an important reauthorization of the National Flood Insurance Program. It also included reforms, and many of those reforms needed to happen to stabilize the financing of the program.

What no one understood adequately then, however, is that those well-intended reforms, in practice, in implementation by FEMA, would lead to unsustainable, completely unaffordable rate increases in a significant number of cases.

That only began to be understood in the months after the bill was passed as FEMA started to implement it, as FEMA came to homeowners, came to State authorities, came to Members of Congress, and began to lay out some of the rates we would see in certain areas.

I am not talking about modest rate increases. We need modest rate increases to stabilize the financing of the program. I am talking about completely unaffordable rate increases in some cases—flood insurance rates going from \$300 a year to \$11,000 a year or \$19,000 a year or \$26,000 a year on a modest middle-class home and on a middle-class family that followed the rules every step of the way. We can't allow that to stand.

First, it is fundamentally unfair. As I said, these middle-class families followed the rules every step of the way. They built to the right elevation when they built their homes, never let their premiums lapse, and never let their insurance lapse.

In that context, for them to be hit with truly unaffordable rate increases—increases that could literally cause them to have to walk away from their home in some significant number of cases and not be able to afford to stay there—is just plain wrong.

Secondly, it is completely counterproductive, because one of the ways we have stabilized the National Flood Insurance Program fiscally is to grow the program, to have more folks paying premiums, and to have more folks covered, not fewer. This aspect of Biggert-Waters, which would lead to truly unaffordable rate increases in a significant number of cases, is unworkable from the very vantage point of the goal of Biggert-Waters to stabilize the system. So we can't let that stand for that reason either.

The good news is, because of those very real problems, both the Senate, and now the House, have come together in a major bipartisan way to fix the issue. The Senate acted about 1 month ago passing meaningful legislation. I was an original coauthor and a strong supporter. As I said a few minutes ago, the House acted two nights ago—Mardi Gras night in Louisiana terms—to take strong action to fix this program.